

דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



Whose Words?

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[W]e push through the crowd, heading somewhere. Bodies clear frame and we see the HOMELESS MAN sitting on a park bench. His sign reads: “THEE END”. The Homeless Man smiles into camera. We continue forward and in a slow, mysterious, subtle fashion his face slowly transforms into the very pleased, FACE OF GOD, who winks and we CUT TO BLACK.

—Script for *Bruce Almighty* by Steve Koren, Mark O’Keefe, Steve Oedekerker
Amos the prophet is an inspiring and tragic figure.

For two chapters, he denounces the “crimes against humanity” of Israel and her neighbors; in the closing words of this week’s haftarah, he tells us why:

“A lion has roared / Who can but fear?
My Lord God has spoken / Who can but prophesy?” (Amos 3:8)

Why did he leave his home to rail against the people of Israel? Because it was impossible for him not to. The Lion roared; God called him; he saw the moral failings of God’s people and knew he had to speak out.

At the same time, though, his rhetoric and the way he screams at the high priest of Bet El (in chapter 7) make him sound like a street-corner doomsday preacher, an insane person shouting that the world is coming to an end.

We need people like Amos today, who feel so moved by their moral principles that they can’t help but speak out. And, unlike for Amos, we need to ensure those people have platforms from which they can be heard. At the end of the film *Bruce Almighty*, a homeless man (played by Jack Jozefson), who has displayed signs foretelling the end of days throughout the movie, appears and morphs into God (played by Morgan Freeman). So, too, does Amos teach us that this kind of moral vision sometimes comes directly from God’s mouth.



Vayeshev 5777

וישב תשע"ז



Being Raised from the Pit

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Three years ago, Jewish novelist Dara Horn published her fourth novel, *A Guide for the Perplexed*. Borrowing its title from Maimonides’s quintessential work of Jewish philosophy, the book follows two sisters, Josephine and Judith, as they struggle with issues of faith, reason, memory, and sibling rivalry. Josephine and Judith serve as stand-ins for Joseph and Judah; in a sense, the novel functions as an extended midrash on a key biblical incident which can be found in this week’s parashah, Vayeshev: the casting of Joseph into the pit at the hands of his brothers. Ultimately, Horn’s Josephine and the biblical Joseph arrive at the same conclusion: through suffering, which both characters experience in their respective tales, one can ultimately come to achieve greatness.

Vayeshev opens by recounting the favor and love which Jacob bestows upon Joseph, and the jealousy which this love incites in Joseph’s brothers. As the text tells us, “And when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of his brothers, they hated him so that they could not speak a friendly word to him” (Gen. 37:1). Due to their hatred, the brothers devise a plan: they conspire to throw Joseph in a pit and tell their father that a “savage beast” devoured him. When Joseph comes upon his brothers, they strip him of his famous “many-colored tunic” and cast him into the pit.

In Horn’s novel, the analogous incident takes place at a summer camp in the Berkshires. Josie, an asthmatic, is forced down into a pit deep in the woods to retrieve her inhaler, which was thrown down by her jealous older sister, Judith. Horn provides a harrowing account of a terrified young girl in the depths of both physical and emotional despair. “The sides of the pit rose up around her, merciless surfaces of mud and stone. For a long moment, oxygen fled her

brain, returning in a dizzying rush that flung her to the ground. She lay on her back, looking up at the sky, feeling the frantic rise and fall of her chest” (36).

Yet all is not lost for Josie. While she is in the pit, afraid and alone, she has a vision: the walls of the pit become hundreds of little drawers, each filled with a memory from her past. Ultimately, this vision evolves into the basis for a software program (called, in the novel, Genizah), which becomes extremely successful and propels Josie to greatness. Her success can be attributed to her experience in the pit: had Josie not undergone such a traumatic incident as a young girl, she might never have achieved the greatness she was destined for.

Joseph’s life follows a similar trajectory. Prior to being cast into the pit, he was living comfortably as his father’s favorite child. Had he not undergone the terrible experience of being traumatized by his brothers, he would never have become a slave in Egypt, interpreted Pharaoh’s dreams, or risen to second-in-command in the Egyptian court. In other words, without the suffering that Joseph was forced to endure, he might never have achieved greatness. Perhaps Josie and Joseph both experience an arc described by Friedrich Nietzsche, who wrote that “every major growth is accompanied by a tremendous crumbling and passing away: suffering, the symptoms of decline, belong to the times of tremendous advance.” Or, as the legendary Jewish American singer-songwriter David Bromberg puts it, “you’ve got to suffer if you want to sing the blues.”

The text of Vayeshev recounts that Joseph was cast into an empty pit, a **בוֹר רֵק**. As we read, “The pit was empty; there was no water in it” (Gen 37:24). In a comment on this verse, Rashi asks the inevitable question: why did the Torah choose to include the second clause in the verse? Since the text already told us that “the pit was empty,” do we not know that there was no water in it? The answer he gives, based on a classical midrash, is that although the pit might have been devoid of water, it was filled with **נחשים ועקרבים**, snakes and scorpions. This is far worse. Instead of giving Joseph a chance to survive by throwing him into an empty pit, in a midrash reminiscent of a scene from *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, the brothers throw him into a pit of snakes, condemning him to almost certain death and ensuring that he suffered to the greatest degree possible.

In a sense, 2016 has felt like a year in which we were collectively cast into a pit. It was the most politically turbulent year in modern memory, and it

culminated in one of the most divisive elections in American history. Furthermore, we lost such luminaries as Leonard Cohen and Elie Wiesel, fires raged throughout Israel, and just this past week, we witnessed the destruction of Aleppo. It sometimes feels as if we are living in an empty pit, a **בוֹר רֵק**, as the language of Genesis puts it. We are suffering. Perhaps we can draw some consolation from the lyrics of another legendary Jewish American singer-songwriter, and hope that “the darkest hour” is, in fact, “right before the dawn.”

Saturday night marks the first night of Hanukkah. Hanukkah is the quintessential Jewish expression of moving from darkness to light. The rabbis of the Talmud teach that Adam celebrated the first Hanukkah after experiencing his first winter solstice, when he realized that the days were no longer getting shorter and darker, but were now getting longer and brighter (BT Avodah Zarah 8a). And as Hillel teaches, we light one more candle each night of the holiday to reflect that we should only ascend in holiness, and never descend, **ואין מורידין מעלין בקדש ואין מורידין** (BT Shabbat 21a).

Just as we light a new candle each night of Hanukkah, so too did Joseph’s reality gradually get brighter; eventually, he was raised from the darkness of suffering in the pit to the light of the Egyptian court. My hope and prayer for us, as we move into Hanukkah and 2017, is that we too are raised from the pit. Unlike Joseph’s brothers, may we remember to always treat each other with love, mercy, and compassion. May the coming year be one in which rise from the darkness, and not be cast further down. To echo Hillel, may 2017 be a year in which we only ascend in holiness, and never descend.

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Inspiration for Each Night of Hanukkah

Sixth Night: Rabbi Ismar Schorsch, Chancellor Emeritus

This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel [the leader of the puny band of exiles who returned in 537 B.C.E. from Babylon to found what would become the Second Jewish Commonwealth]: Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit—said the Lord of Hosts (Zech. 4:6).

וַיַּעַן וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלַי לְאָמֵר
זֶה דְבַר-ה' אֶל-זֶרְבָבֶל
לְאָמֹר לֹא בְחַיִל וְלֹא
בְכַח כִּי אִם-בְּרוּחִי
אָמַר ה' צְבָאוֹת.



In the long run, Jewish survival is not a matter of military might or political sagacity, important as they both are, but an inner resolve that springs from faith. And it is to drive home that fundamental lesson of Jewish history that the rabbis chose to read the words of the prophet Zechariah on the Shabbat of Hanukkah.

What do you think sustains the Jewish people? Faith? Something else?

Seventh Night: Professor Arnold M. Eisen, Chancellor

[A] frank appraisal of the periods in which Judaism flourished will indicate that not only did a certain amount of assimilation and acculturation not impede Jewish continuity, but that in a profound sense, this assimilation and acculturation was a stimulus to original thinking and expression, a source of renewed vitality. (Chancellor Gerson Cohen, z"l, "The Blessing of Assimilation in Jewish History")



The Hanukkah story is the perfect stimulus for such reflections, especially when read, as some historians do, not as a conflict between Jews and a tyrannical government, but as a dispute among Jews themselves over which Greek customs are acceptable and which cross the line to assimilation or apostasy.

Where have you seen assimilation or acculturation provide "renewed vitality" to Judaism?

Eighth Night: Dr. Benjamin D. Sommer, Professor of Bible

הַן בְּכָל דּוֹר / יִקּוּם הַגִּבּוֹר / גּוֹאֵל הָעָם.
שְׁמַע! בְּיָמִים הֵהֵם בְּזִמְנֵי הַזֶּה! / מַכְבִּי
מוֹשִׁיעַ וּפּוֹדֵה!
See, in every generation / A hero arises /
Who saves the nation. / Listen! In those
days in this season! / The Maccabee was
a savior, a redeemer! (Zionist Hanukkah
song by Menashe Rabina)



In every age a hero or sage / Arose to our aid. / Hark! In days of yore in Israel's ancient land / Brave Maccabeus led the faithful band. (English adaptation of the same song by Judith K. Eisenstein, published in *Union Songster: Songs and Prayers for Jewish Youth*, New York, 1960)

[T]he [1960] song puts him [Judah Maccabee] next to a sage, and it mentions his followers' faith as prominently as his own bravery. ... The contrast between these two songs encapsulates a debate between two views not only of Hanukkah but of Judaism and of Jewish history.

What do you value in a leader? Might and bravery? Knowledge and faith? Something else?

TORAH FROM JTS HANUKKAH SPECIAL



Blessings and Songs for Hanukkah Candle Lighting

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱ-לֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם,
אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוְּנוּ לְהַדְלִיק נֵר שֶׁל חֲנֻכָּה.

*Barukh atah Adonai, Eloheinu melekh ha'olam,
asher kideshanu bemitzvotav, vetzivanu lehadlik ner shel Hanukkah.*

Blessed are you, God, ruler of the universe, who has sanctified us with Your commandments and commanded us to kindle the light of Hanukkah.

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱ-לֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם,
שְׁעָשָׂה נִסִּים לְאַבוֹתֵינוּ בְּיָמִים הֵהֵם בְּזִמְנֵי הַזֶּה.

*Barukh atah Adonai, Eloheinu melekh ha'olam,
she'asah nisim la'avoteinu bayamim hahem bazman hazeh.*

Blessed are You, God, ruler of the universe, who performed miracles for our ancestors in those days at this season.

On the first night only:

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱ-לֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, שֶׁהַחַיִּינוּ וְקִיַּמְנוּ וְהִגִּיעְנוּ לְזִמְנֵי הַזֶּה.

*Barukh atah Adonai, Eloheinu melekh ha'olam,
shehechyanu vekiyemanu vehigiyanu lazman hazeh.*

Blessed are You, God, ruler of the universe, who has kept us in life and sustained us and brought us to this season.

מַעֲזוֹ צוֹר יְשׁוּעָתִי לָךְ נֶאֱדָה לְשִׁבְחֵךְ / תִּכּוֹן בֵּית תְּפִלָּתִי וְשָׁם תּוֹדֶה נִזְבַּח /
לְעֵת תִּכְיֶין מִטְבַּח מִצַּר הַמְּנַבֵּחַ / אֶז אֶגְמֹר בְּשִׁיר מְזֻמּוֹר חֲנֻכַּת הַמִּזְבֵּחַ.

Mighty rock of my salvation, to praise You is a delight / Restore my house of prayer and there we will bring a thanksgiving offering / When you will prepare the destruction for the blaspheming foe / Then I will complete the dedication of the altar with songs and hymns.

הַנִּרְוֹת הִלְלוּ אֲנוּ מְדַלְקִים עַל הַנִּסִּים וְעַל הַנִּפְלְאוֹת וְעַל הַתְּשׁוּעוֹת וְעַל הַמַּלְחָמוֹת
שְׁעָשִׂיתָ לְאַבוֹתֵינוּ בְּיָמִים הֵהֵם בְּזִמְנֵי הַזֶּה עַל יְדֵי כְהֵנִיךְ הַקְּדוּשִׁים וְכָל שְׁמוֹנֵת יָמֵי חֲנֻכָּה
הַנִּרְוֹת הִלְלוּ קִדְּשׁ הֵם וְאִין לָנוּ רְשׁוֹת לְהִשְׁתַּמֵּשׁ בָּהֶם אֲלֵא לְרִאוֹתָם בְּלִבְד כְּדִי לְהוֹדוֹת
וְלִהְלֵל לְשִׁמְךָ הַגָּדוֹל עַל נִסִּיךָ וְעַל נִפְלְאוֹתֶיךָ וְעַל יְשׁוּעָתְךָ.

We light these candles because of the miracles and the wonders, because of the salvations and the battles, that You performed for our ancestors in those days at this season through Your holy priests. And during all eight days of Hanukkah these candles are sacred and we may not use them for any purpose other than to look at them in order to thank and to praise Your great name, because of Your miracles, Your wonders, and Your salvation.

First Night: Rabbi David Hoffman, Vice Chancellor and Chief Advancement Officer

Our rabbis taught: when the first man saw the daylight hours were becoming shorter and shorter, he said, "Woe is me! Perhaps because I have sinned, the world is becoming dark around me and is returning to chaos. This is the death sentence declared upon me by Heaven!" He sat for eight days in fasting and prayer. After the winter solstice when he saw the days becoming longer and longer, he said, "This is simply the way of the world!" He went and made an eight-day festival (BT Avodah Zarah 8a).

ת"ר: לפי שראה אדם הראשון יום שמתמעט והולך, אמר: אוילי, שמא בשביל שסרחתי עולם חשוך בעדי וחוזר לתוהו ובוהו, וזו היא מיתה שנקנסה עלי מן השמים, עמד וישב ח' ימים בתענית [ובתפלה], כיון שראה תקופת טבת וראה יום שמאריך והולך, אמר: מנהגו של עולם הוא, הלך ועשה שמונה ימים טובים.



Hanukkah has, in its distant past, the most universal of messages. It is a holiday about experiencing fear, vulnerability, and darkness and not being consumed. It is a holiday that reminds us that light and security will return again, as sure as we know darkness will return. These are the cycles of life. The challenge is remembering that the darkness will, in fact, retreat. So this too, like the story of the oil, is a story of profound faith.

What can each of us do so that we are not consumed by our fears?

Second Night: Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, Director of Israel Programs

To whom may Abraham be likened? To a king's friend, who saw the king walking about in dark alleys and began lighting the way for him through a window. When the king looked up and saw him, he said: instead of lighting the way for me from a distance, come out and light the way for me in my very presence. So too did God say to Abraham (Genesis Rabbah 30:10).

ולמה אברהם דומה לאוהבו של מלך, שראה את המלך מהלך במבואות האפלים, הציץ אוהבו והתחיל מאיר עליו דרך החלון, הציץ המלך וראה אותו, אמר לו עד שאתה מאיר לי דרך חלון, בא והאיר לפני, כך אמר הקב"ה לאברהם.



Abraham, a human being, leads the way for God. He walks before God and creates his own light before God. That is the truest light of redemption—when we as human beings light the way for God.

What can we do to "light the way" towards a better world?

Third Night: Rabbi Mychal Springer, Director, Center for Pastoral Education

The House of Shammai say: on the first day [of Hanukkah] one lights eight, from then on, one fewer each day. And the House of Hillel say: on the first day one lights one, from then on, one more each day (BT Shabbat 21a)

בית שמאי אומרים: יום ראשון מדליק שמנה, מכאן ואילך פוחת והולך; ובית הלל אומרים: יום ראשון מדליק אחת, מכאן ואילך מוסיף והולך.



For many of us who suffer... the reality of darkness can't be ignored ... In being with one another in community and not being abandoned in darkness, new possibilities do emerge. In a sense, we need both the descent into darkness of Beit Shammai and the ascent into light of Beit Hillel to come together in our hearts to make a whole that is Hanukkah.

What can you do to support people close to you who are struggling?

Fourth Night: Rabbi Judith Hauptman, E. Billi Ivry Professor of Talmud and Rabbinic Culture

Our Rabbis teach: it is appropriate to place the Hanukkah lamp outside one's door. If one lives in an upper storey, one places it at the window facing a public thoroughfare. (BT Shabbat 21b)

תנו רבנן: נר חנוכה מצוה להניחה על פתח ביתו מבחוץ. אם היה דר בעלייה מניחה בחלון הסמוכה לרשות הרבים.



The social and religious context in which Jews lived had an impact on the development of Jewish ritual. ... Jews lived in Babylonia amongst Zoroastrians and a central feature of the Zoroastrian religion is holy fire, especially visible at this dark time of year. It is very likely that the Rabbis who developed the rules of the public display of Hanukkah lamps wanted to make sure that Jews were not drawn to the Zoroastrian fire celebrations and were lighting the Hanukkah lamps.

How can we ensure that Hanukkah measures up to other seasonal holidays?

Fifth Night: Rabbi Sarit Horwitz, The Rabbinical School (Class of 2015)

Rashi on "outside" (from yesterday's text): In order to publicize the miracle.

מבחוץ: משום פרסומי ניסא



The underlying message of that miracle is actually about the ability to practice an uninhibited Judaism, a type of religious expression that's unhindered by both outside powers and internal self-consciousness. ... It's good to be different. It's good to publicize your individuality and be proud of traditions that not everyone might have. And that's a message we should definitely share with our neighbors.

What Jewish traditions or values do you want to share with your neighbors?